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Verhoog, Suzanne

published in

LAND GOVERNANCE IN TRANSITIONAL REGIMES [Proceedings]
2020

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citation for published version (APA)

Verhoog, S. (2020). LAND GOVERNANCE IN TRANSITIONAL REGIMES: A first Empirical Conceptualization for Identifying and Mapping Romanian Hybrid Land Governance Networks. In *LAND GOVERNANCE IN TRANSITIONAL REGIMES [Proceedings]: A first Empirical Conceptualization for Identifying and Mapping Romanian Hybrid Land Governance Networks* (pp. 1-30). World Bank Group.

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WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



LAND GOVERNANCE IN TRANSITIONAL REGIMES **A first Empirical Conceptualization for Identifying and Mapping Romanian Hybrid** **Land Governance Networks**

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Paper prepared for presentation at the
“2020 WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY”
The World Bank - Washington DC, March 16-20, 2020

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Abstract

Eastern European countries are increasingly targeted for land grabbing by (inter) national investors and oligarchs. Specifically Romania is one of the most heavily targeted countries. Land fragmentation, fuzziness in land property relations, weak legislation, underdeveloped land markets, high soil fertility, and low land prices seem to have further contributed to this land grabbing phenomenon. EU-membership seems to have worsened the situation. EU farm subsidies created an extra stimulus for international investors to invest in ‘foreign’ farmland. Romanian land governance is embedded in fuzziness and complexities, with the legacy of communism deeply rooted in its institutions and social structures. This complexity is exacerbated and exploited by a wide range of state and non-state actors involved in these land deals, operating at a variety of governance layers. Based on theoretical and empirical insights this paper presents a first outline of a conceptual framework, which identifies four hybrid governance levels.

Key Words:

Land governance, Romania, transitional regimes, intermediary elite brokers, hybrid networks



I. *Introduction & Problem Definition – Romania a Case Study*

Eastern European countries are increasingly targeted for land grabbing by (inter)national investors and oligarchs (Nolte, Chamberlain, & Giger, 2016). Eastern Europe ranks 3rd in the category of most targeted regions worldwide for LSLA¹, covering a total amount of almost 15 million hectares² (LM, 2019).

Specifically Romania is mentioned as one of the Eastern European countries most severely targeted for large-scale land grabbing (e.g. Constantin, Luminița, & Vasile, 2017), in particular the South-Eastern regions Brăila, Călărași and Constanța are currently most severely targeted by transnational oligarchs (Ecoruralis, 2015; Popovici, Mitrică, & Mocanu, 2018). One of the main problems in Romanian land grabbing practices, is a lack of reliable accurate statistical and scientific data data³ on land administration (EP, 2015; Popovici et al., 2018). Available data from several sources seem to offer a biased view. Several media and scholarly research claim that up to 40%-60%⁴ of Romanian arable land⁵ is in the hands of international investors (Constantin et al., 2017; Ecoruralis, 2015; EESC, 2015; EP, 2015; TNI, 2013). One source even claims that international investors own all of the agricultural land in the county of Timișoara, which is a big problem for local farmers⁶. A recent document from the Romanian Ministry of Agriculture reveals the total arable land in the hands of foreign investors is 422,000 ha; 5% of Romanian arable land, in contrary to the figures presented in the media; 40-60%⁷. Directly exposing the data gap between ‘official’ figures, and unofficial figures presented by the media.

The South-Eastern regions of Romania are generally considered poorer and more vulnerable for land consolidation and land grabbing in contrast to the Western regions of Banat and Transylvania, although land grabbing also occurs in these regions, as the above example illustrates, but usually on a smaller scale. In the latter regions, land administration processes were much better organized during the Austro-Hungarian Empire and consequently documented by the bourgeoisie upper class. The differences between these two regions are still reflected in contemporary land administration and land transaction processes and practices, which is directly linked to the highly consolidated industrial farms, leased from the state (former state farms).

¹ 1) Africa (33,6 mil. ha), 2) Latin America and the Caribbean (29,6 mil. ha), 3) Eastern Europe (14,8 mil. ha), 4) Asia (8,2 mil. ha), & 5) Oceania (3,9 mil. ha) Source: <https://landmatrix.org/data/by-target-region/>. Accessed 13 February 2020.

² Compared to the Land Matrix statistics from May 2019, this figure has more than doubled (from 6.7 to 14.8 mil. ha, and from 299 to 462 transnational land deals) Source: <https://landmatrix.org/region/europe/>. Accessed 13 February 2020.

³ Overall there is a lack of accurate and reliable data on land documentation in Romania in general, and more specific data on land ownership (titles), large-scale land acquisitions (the Land Matrix public database on land deals is the only source of information and biased/incomplete), land markets, land prices, CAP subsidies, et cetera.

⁴ 10% held by non-EU investors, and 20-30% by EU-28 investor countries. These resources refer to a total amount of 5 mil. hectares of land.

⁵ Utilized Agriculture Area (UAA): 13,4 mil. hectares, including 8,7 mil. hectares of arable land, as of 2018. Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-datasets/-/tag00025>. Accessed 13 February 2020.

⁶ Interview conducted with respondent 8.

⁷ <https://lantulalimantar.ro/datele-oficiale-prezentate-de-ministerul-agriculturii-contrazic-propaganda-despre-strainii-care-lucreaza-terenuri-agricole-in-romania/>. Accessed 24 June 2019.



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WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



Land fragmentation, fuzziness in land property relations, weak legislation, underdeveloped land markets, high soil fertility, and low land prices⁸ seem to have further contributed to this land grabbing phenomenon in Romania.

The ‘abolition of private *‘bourgeois’* property’ (Marx & Engels, 2004 (1969/1848)) was the central premise during communism. Translated in the *‘collectivization of land’* or *‘socialization of property’* as the central agriculture principle throughout the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, resulting in collective farms (*kolkhozes*), state-farms and private farms (in the case of Poland). State farms were organized through a process of nationalization, which often entailed illegal land confiscation of land from so-called *‘enemies of the people’*. Collectivization of land through collective farms was less rigorous and based on the premise of joint property of individual ‘family’ farms through ‘voluntary donations’, however *‘[t]here was little room for negotiation in the decision to join’* (Verdery, 2003, p. 42).

The Cold War ended with the collapse of communism in 1989, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In post-communist societies, and more specifically Romania, *‘undoing the collective’* transformed the physical as well as social landscapes for good; from horizontal ‘family state farms’ toward more vertical oriented large-scale commercial farming, which resulted in social and economic polarization (Verdery, 2003), and a highly fragmented landscape. According to Eurostat’s 2016 Farm Structure Survey (Eurostat, 2018b), Romania’s farmland distribution is highly contrasting compared to other EU member states. 33% of European farms are located in Romania, however with a relative low output (3.4%). Romania has the largest number of agriculture holding (3,4 mil.) of which most (91.8%) are under 5 ha. It is not a surprise to find that 0.5% of the large farms (≥ 50 ha) are farming half (51%) of all the UAA (see footnote) in the country. The average age of farm managers in the EU is relatively high (32% ≥ 65), Romania peaks with 44.3% (Bălteanu & Popovici, 2010; Eurostat, 2018b).

During the Romanian Revolution, archives in villages were burned, including land documentation⁹, which further contributed to fuzziness and complexities in land administration processes. Currently 36,7% of Romanian arable land is officially registered in the Cadastre¹⁰. Sources refer to approximately 90% of Romanian arable land not being officially documented and registered, making local landowners extra vulnerable for expropriation by (corrupt) local level authorities¹¹.

⁸ The average land price (as of 2016) in Romania is €1, 958/ha, compared to €63,000/ha in the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2018a).

⁹ Information gathered from students (respondent 5).

¹⁰ <http://www.ancpi.ro/index.php/en/>. Accessed 09 February 2020.

¹¹ Information provided by respondent 3^{II}. This was furthermore confirmed by stories from several respondents. Landowners are informally entitled to the land (customary land rights), but formally do not have access to the land.



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ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



Post-communist rural land re-distribution processes were often described as fuzzy¹² (e.g. Sturgeon & Sikor, 2004; Verdery, 2004), an extra stimulus for corrupt actors to enter the property playing field. Land ownership transformed from collective state-owned farms to private ownership, hereby freeing central authorities to deal with land rights issues and providing the rural population, enabling local and national brokers to benefit from this situation (Sturgeon & Sikor, 2004; Verdery, 2004). This is specifically the case in the poorer South-Eastern parts of Romania, where big international industrial farms replaced the state farms. Parallels can be drawn with post-colonial fuzziness in property relations in Africa and Asia; local elites profited from this situation by gaining control over (the process of allocating) resources through previous powerful state and party connections.

An overall lack of reliable accurate data¹³ on land administration contributes to this fuzziness in land property relations. One of the key aims of this study is to contribute to the closure of this data gap.

In practice post-socialist property rights are far more complex than the Western neo-liberal notion of post-socialist reform, where property is seen as an exclusive private asset embedded in formal 'rights' and 'obligations' (Sturgeon & Sikor, 2004). Property is embedded in a framework of local social and cultural processes and (historical) power relations¹⁴.

Parallels can be drawn with the Western perspective of the CAP, which does not apply to the local conditions for farmers to obtain EU subsidies. The main objective of the recent governmental land law reforms is consolidation of the fragmented land (Vasile, Mihai, & Mirela, 2017), directly benefiting international investors. Organizations like the League of Associations of Agricultural Producers in Romania (LAPAR), are furthermore promoting land purchase by international investors¹⁵.

Post-communist reforms toward privatization of communal land resulted in a long-term agriculture crisis due to a lack of experience of post-communist regimes with the (global) market economy and the unwillingness to adapt to these new circumstances. In post-socialist land reform processes, former workers on the collective farms were given a share of the land (*pai*). It was however often not clear who previously owned what due to vanished demarcations (Verdery, 2003). Several 'decollectivization laws' left farmers with less land than formerly owned (before cooperative ownership during communism), and often 'left-over' land was distributed, far away from the original plots (Odobescu, 2016). In Ukraine it took 10 years, from passing a bill in 2003 to the full implementation, resulting in allocation of individual land titles in 2012 (Sarna, 2014).

¹² The term 'fuzzy property' is firstly introduced by Katherine Verdery to describe ambiguities in post socialist property rights; 'lacking a clarity of borders, owners and exclusion' (Sturgeon & Sikor, 2004, p. 3).

¹³ Overall a lack of accurate and reliable data on land documentation in general, and more specific data on land ownership (titles), large-scale land acquisitions (the Land Matrix public database on land deals is the only source of information and biased/incomplete), land markets, land prices, CAP subsidies, et cetera.

¹⁴ Authors' own interpretation inspired by Sturgeon and Sikor (2004); Verdery (2004).

¹⁵ <https://www.g4media.ro/propaganda-despre-strainii-care-au-invadat-agricultura-din-romania-contrazisa-de-datele-oficiale-ale-ministerul-agriculturii.html>



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WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



Land law reforms can however, if applied under the right conditions, possibly offer a solution for small-scale farmers and their lands. The Romanian parliament is currently drafting a new land law¹⁶ which is supposed to regulate land sale by fixed ceilings to better protect small-scale farmers. Large-scale land transactions by international investors will be restricted to a certain amount of hectares that can be bought and smallholders will be given the first right to buy the land. Also special attention will be given to the youth. The question remains whether this new law will have a positive impact on smallholders, since land sale is centrally controlled by the government and, as earlier mentioned, further facilitated through local and national intermediaries. Earlier land law reforms did not prevent international actors to enter the property playing field.

EU-membership seems to have worsened the situation. EU farm subsidies created an extra stimulus for international investors to invest in ‘foreign’ farmland. The largest EU expansion of the East with the West was realised in May 2004 when ten countries joined the EU, which included eight Eastern European countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia). Romania joined the European Union, together with Bulgaria in 2007¹⁷. EU-membership enabled easy access to farm subsidies for EU and non-EU stakeholders to invest in low priced Eastern European land, hereby creating an extra stimulus for international investors to invest in Romanian farmland through so-called local and national intermediaries. Land purchase by international investors was restricted during the 2007-2014 ‘Moratorium on land sales’ (Ecoruralis, 2015, p. 6).

The Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) is seen as one of the main incentives for large-scale land grabbing in Eastern European states (Geisler, 2015; George & Bache, 2001; Odobescu, 2016; Schivatcheva, 2014; TNI, 2013). Combined with governmental land laws focusing on consolidation of the fragmented post-communist lands (Stockmans, 2018).

Criticism on the CAP was mainly directed toward the ‘productivist model’ of agriculture focussing on large-scale industrial monoculture farming models (Ecoruralis, 2010) and less on small-scale sustainable farming models. The CAP is currently undergoing a reform. One of the main aspects of the post-2020 CAP is renationalization. Renationalization of the CAP comes with more freedom and responsibilities for EU member states, which can result in unfair competition between sectors and countries, and a decrease in agricultural income¹⁸. Renationalization furthermore likely increases governmental power over land deals, which can be even more problematic, combined with current trends wherein democratic nationalism is slowly being replaced by more autocratic regimes, consequently facing higher levels of corruption.

¹⁶ See for example: <https://www.romania-insider.com/romanians-priority-farmland-2017>. Accessed 24 February 2019.

¹⁷ Source: https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries/member-countries/romania_en. Accessed 23 June 2019.

¹⁸ See for example: <https://www.farm-europe.eu/news/reforme-de-la-pac-un-projet-de-renationalisation-qui-couterait-20-au-revenu-des-agriculteurs/>



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ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



There is increasing evidence that the EU CAP subsidy framework is feeding Eastern-European oligarchs and (state) populists, ‘hiding behind complex ownership structures’¹⁹. As earlier stated; proper data on land administration is largely missing, hereby fuelling state corruption and hence land grabs. Further research is needed to support underlying narrative. Apart from fuelling Eastern-European oligarchs and populists, the CAP also leads to deterioration of Eastern-European farmland biodiversity, as a consequence of agricultural intensification (Reif & Vermouzek, 2019).

Currently there is an emerging body of literature studying land grabbing in a European, post-socialist setting (e.g. Carroccio, Crescimanno, Galati, & Tulone, 2016; Constantin et al., 2017; LM, 2018; Nolte et al., 2016; Petrescu-Mag, Petrescu, & Petrescu-Mag, 2017; van der Ploeg, Franco, & Borras Jr, 2015; Visser & Spoor, 2011)²⁰.

Scholars’ main focus in this large-scale land grabbing debate is on international processes and the role of international investors (e.g. Cotula, 2012, 2013; Sud, 2014). Specifically in Romania and Post-Soviet Eurasia reference has been made to non-state business actors and oligarchs (Dale-Harris, 2015c; Odobescu, 2016; Plank, 2013; Sarna, 2014; Verdery, 2003; Visser, Mamonova, & Spoor, 2012). In both cases largely neglecting the central role of local and national actors in land investments.

The important role of local and national elites in initiating and facilitating land deals is acknowledged in the literature (e.g. Borras & Franco, 2010; Cotula, 2012, 2013; Derman, Odgaard, & Sjaastad, 2007; Evers, Seagle, & Krijtenburg, 2013; R. Hall, Scoones, & Tsikata, 2015; Hilhorst, Nelen, & Traoré, 2011; Kaag & Zoomers, 2014; Nolte et al., 2016). A further theorization and conceptualization of these important national and domestic actors is however missing (Verhoog, 2015a)²¹. The increasing importance of these local and national actors involved in land transactions is evident. Detailed empirical studies of the way they operate and interact are emerging. Sud (2017) refers to ‘new superpowers’ when describing: war veterans acting as intermediaries in Zimbabwe; land investors in Cambodia and Vietnam operating through middlemen in order to avoid official rules and pathways; and a network of brokers in India acting as an intermediary between companies and governments. These ‘new superpowers’ (Sud, 2017) or ‘land-grabbing entrepreneurs’ (TNI, 2013; van der Ploeg et al., 2015) often referred to as brokers, elites, intermediate actors or ‘middle-men’ (Sud, 2014, 2016), operate for example, as a mediator between governments officials and private companies, often through a maze of unofficial shady networks and institutions, hereby avoiding the official rules and pathways making them difficult to identify and trace.

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/03/world/europe/eu-farm-subsidy-hungary.html>. Accessed 7 February 2020.

²⁰ Non-academic studies include a study on Land Grabbing in Europe by the Transnational Institute (TNI, 2013), and a study on the Extent of Farmland Grabbing in the EU by the European Parliament (EP, 2015).

²¹ As became also evident at a recent workshop on ‘land brokers, farmers and financiers’, held the 27th of November 2017 at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague. The presented (ethnographic) studies on land brokerage, overall lack a further theoretical conceptualization and classification of brokerage <https://www.iss.nl/en/land-brokers-farmers-and-financiers>, last accessed 11-05-’18.



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ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



Several media articles have recently started to report on the important role of these local intermediaries in Eastern Europe, facilitating large-scale land transactions for international investors (Dale-Harris, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Odobescu, 2016; Stockmans, 2018).

Scholarly articles on the role of such intermediaries and brokerage in Eastern Europe are however scarce. The interconnectivity of international investors with local actors seems evident; Visser and Spoor (2011) mention foreign investors and their brokers involved in agricultural FDI in post-Soviet Eurasia, while Nolte et al. (2016) emphasize the role of foreign investors collaborating with local companies. In one of the first academic studies on land concentration and land grabbing in Europe, van der Ploeg et al. (2015) conclude that a new group of ‘deal brokers’ in finance, business and property seems to have emerged, hereby joining the ‘old established elites’ in mainly commercial (agricultural) businesses. These actors seem to be as deeply involved in land deals, as are foreign investors²². This often less visible process of land involvement²³ by local and national elites need to be seen in a broader context of (post)socialism and state-ownership where (state) elites often (mis)use their position to acquire land to their benefit, hereby enhancing their ‘power’ position, often at the expense of local communities, and small-scale farmers who are highly dependent upon these institutions.

In the academic literature there is ambiguity concerning the concepts ‘intermediaries’ (and adjacent concepts like middlemen, broker, et cetera) and local and national ‘elites’. In the underlying literature study I therefore identify a relative fluid group of ‘intermediary elite brokers’. Furthermore current empirical research on land brokerage lacks a conceptual foundation. This theoretical gap urgently needs to be addressed in order to better understand how *intermediary elites* operate, interact, and organize themselves in their (patronage) network(s) within and between local, national, regional and global levels in large-scale land acquisition practices in post-communist transitional Eastern Europe.

The theoretical and empirical research challenge thus lies in theorizing and conceptualizing this newly emerging group of influential ‘intermediary elite brokers’ operating (with)in their informal (patronage) networks on local, regional, national, and international level. Studying elites in their networks, and how they interact within and between their networks is still much neglected by scholars from various research disciplines theoretically as well as empirically (Abbink & Salverda, 2013). In addition, relatively few scholars study ‘*Elite Theory*’, specifically within the anthropology literature and there still remains confusion in the conceptualization of elites (Higley & Pakulski, 2012).

In order to understand how intermediary elites historically developed over time, both ‘old’ and ‘new’ intermediary elites will therefore be taken into account for this study. So far no research was found

²² Personal communication with Prof. Pauline E. Peters, Center for International Development, Harvard University, 12 May 2013.

²³ For now land involvement is mentioned as activities related to facilitating and initiating private (foreign) investors to acquire land. The role and impact of national and local intermediary elites will be subject of investigating for my study.



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ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



that touches upon *the role* and interconnectivity of established old nomenklatura elites (on national, regional and local levels) and newly emerging elites in land practices in post-communist Eastern Europe. This study will aim to find answers to the question why and how land is being used as a transactional brokerage asset at the expense of local communities.

Land grabbing seems to be increasingly problematic in post-socialist Eastern Europe. Specifically small-scale subsistence farmers are losing their lands rapidly. Renationalization of the CAP and reform of land laws lead to further insecurities. Local and national intermediaries seem to play a crucial role in initiating and facilitating land deals globally, however a further theorizing and conceptualizing of these important actors lacks in the literature. Part of the research challenge of this study thus lies in theorizing and conceptualizing these groups of influential intermediary elites, operating in their fluid networks on local, regional, national, and international levels. Intermediary elites cannot be studied in isolation, but must be seen in a broader context of their horizontal and vertical networks on several levels, embedded in their historical, cultural, economic, and political context, as well as within societal structures and relations. Considering its history in socialism, where the established nomenklatura elites as well as newly emerging elites play a crucial role, post-communist countries are particularly interesting for this research. No research was found that specifically focuses on *the role* and *impact* of intermediary elite brokers in land grabbing practices in Eastern European post-socialist transitional democracies. For this study I have therefore developed a conceptual framework in which this newly group of emerging intermediary elite brokers can be best studied and analyzed.

Romanian land governance is embedded in fuzziness and complexities. This complexity is exacerbated and exploited by a wide range of state and non-state actors involved in these land deals, operating at different governance layers. To gain more insight in the various actors operating at the several governance levels, in this article I will present a conceptual framework based on theoretical and empirical insights. Based on an extensive literature review, a desk study, and original empirical data collected during several fieldwork visits to Romania from 2017-2019, I identify four hybrid governance levels: an upper global layer of European actors, international investors/oligarchs, a national layer of governmental (state) elites, oligarchs and private investors, a relatively new conceptualized group of in-between mediators which I identified as 'Intermediary Elite Brokers', and a lower level group of various local actors. Hereby transcending local, regional, national, and/or transnational borders. This paper will therefore offer a first exploratory study of Romanian hybrid land governance networks, underlying reciprocal relationships and their interconnectivities on four hybrid connected governance levels.



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ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



For this research an interdisciplinary approach of political science, sociology, and anthropology will be applied. Specifically an ethnographic focus of this study can deliver a significant contribution to elite theory due to its focus on elite cultures and social structures.

I have formulated the following research question for my PhD project:

‘How do intermediary elites operate, interact, and organize themselves in their (patronage) network(s) within and between local, national, regional and global levels in large-scale land acquisition (LSLA) practices in post-communist transitional Eastern Europe, and what is the societal and environmental impact on smallholders?’

For this research article the main focus is to establish a conceptual framework for identifying a relative new group of intermediary elite brokers, and further elaborate upon this specific group of brokers in a self established ‘Elite Interaction Model’ framework, where on four governance levels interacting actors will be identified, defined and elaborated upon.

The main aim of this study is to answer my first sub-question:

‘How can ‘intermediary elite brokers’ in the Eastern-European large-scale land acquisition debate be best defined, and how do they manifest and organize themselves – how do they operate and maneuver (with)in their networks on local, national, regional and global level?’

II Methodology

Primary qualitative data has been collected through (ethnographic) fieldwork: semi-structured interviews, field notes, informal conversations & participant observations (see Appendix I for a list of respondents). Secondary data has been retrieved from the following sources: documents (policy papers, reports from NGOs, articles from journalists, documents on land administration, et cetera), online databases: Land Matrix Public Database on Large-Scale Land Deals, Romanian statistical agencies APIA & INS, ANCPI cadastre, Amadeus/Orbis Bank Focus and Eurostat, geo-data from Google Earth and photographs from site visits. Data collection for my PhD research in general also aims to contribute to closing the data gap on land administration in Romania (see also footnote 13). Collected empirical data from the conducted interview is transcribed and analyzed with ATLAS.ti, an analytical Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software tool.

For this study theoretically as well as methodologically an interdisciplinary approach of political science, sociology, and anthropology will be applied. Studies on ‘power elites’ tend to focus more on the political institutional elite, with hence a strong focus on Marxism and social class theory, while a socio-anthropological approach to elites focuses more on ‘elite cultures’ and ‘social structures’ (e.g.



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ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



Abbink & Salverda, 2013; Bourdieu, 1986; Shore & Nugent, 2002). An ethnographic approach hence researches the ‘practice of social life’, which makes it possible to view the complexity of the social world from inside out (O’reilly, 2012, p. 10). This offers much more detailed information on how the social world is constructed ontologically and can be interpreted epistemologically, hereby delivering rich qualitative empirical data.

Romania will serve as the research site for this study. From a contemporary and historical perspective several regions/counties²⁴ in Romania are interesting to visit; the South-Eastern poorer and most vulnerable regions for land consolidation and land grabbing in contrast to the richer Western regions (Banat & Transylvania). In the latter regions, land administration processes were much better organized during the Austro-Hungarian Empire and consequently documented by the bourgeoisie upper class. The differences between these two regions are still reflected in contemporary land administration and land transaction processes and practices. The South-Eastern regions Brăila, Călărași and Constanța are currently most severely targeted by transnational oligarchs (Ecoruralis, 2015)²⁵. Mainly due to high soil fertility (black gold), lack of proper land registrations, and the legacy of communism, which is directly translated in highly consolidated industrial farms. For this study I have conducted fieldwork in the South-Eastern part of Romania in where I visited one of the largest farms in Romania in the region Călărași, owned by a Lebanese investor.

III Theorizing and Conceptualizing Brokerage

Important in understanding the concept of ‘brokerage’ are the works of French sociologist Mendras (1976) ‘*Sociétés Paysannes. Eléments pur une théorie de la paysannerie*’ (A Theory on Peasant Society) in offering an extensive review of the literature on clientelism and brokerage (patron-client relationships), and the earlier work of Dutch Anthropologist Boissevain (1974), focussing specifically on brokers as social entrepreneurs, and manipulators, mainly driven by self-interest.

Brokers or brokerage can be identified as a business enterprise, as entrepreneurs, or social manipulators (Boissevain, 1969, 1974). In conceptualizing this intermediate group of people, it should be taken into account that their status remains informal; they have never been officially assigned as ‘broker’. Normatively it is thus important to distinguish brokers based on: 1) its definition, and 2) the position they occupy from their own viewpoint and the viewpoint of others (Bierschenk, Chauveau, & de Sardan, 2002). Becoming a ‘broker’ depends upon two criteria: 1) ‘the structure and content of his social network, and 2) the willingness to use this for personal gain.’ (Boissevain, 1974, pp. 153-154). In becoming a ‘successful broker’ (Figure 1) the following criteria are important: 1) centrality (based

²⁴ Romania is divided into 8 administrative regions (regiuni) and 42 counties (județe), including Bucharest. https://ro.wikivoyage.org/wiki/Judetetele_României. Last accessed 25 May 2019.

²⁵ As firstly mentioned by respondent 3^{II}. And also covered by the national media: <https://www.romania-insider.com/romanians-priority-farmland-2017/>. Last accessed 12 May 2018.



Institutions for Equity & Resilience

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



upon a certain position in society, hereby referring to occupation, education, age, intermediary position (bridging gaps)), 2) the time available to manage social relations, and 3) power (over first order resources). (Boissevain, 1974). Starting from, or finding a 'niche' allows the broker to develop its skills on all three levels.

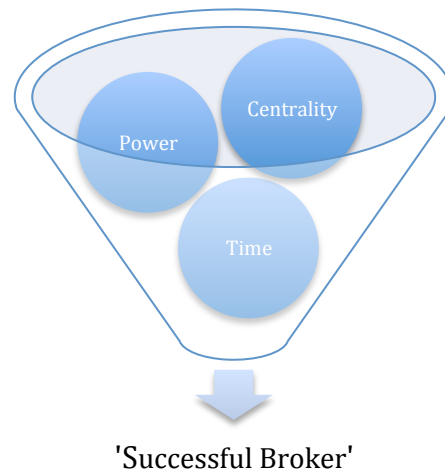


Figure 1 Conceptualizing Brokerage

Source: author's own interpretation, based on Boissevain (1974).

Brokerage as a career move – climbing the hierarchical ladder

How do brokers make a profit? And how do brokers retain and strengthen their position over time. Brokers' most important social capital (see Bourdieu (1986)) is their network, facilitated through social transactions. The value gained through these transactions is called by (Boissevain, 1974) *tariff* or *credit*. These 'social transactions' are based on (reciprocal) expectations Boissevain (1969) instead of concrete deals where money is being paid at the moment of the transaction itself. Transactions are based on the principles of '*communicate now and pay later*' or '*pay now and communicate later*'. The credit of the broker thus consists of '[...] *what others think his capital to be*' (Boissevain, 1974, p. 159), also referred to as 'fiduciary capital' (Bierschenk et al., 2002). So the broker deliberately keeps his capital vague. A broker is a social entrepreneur in his own business. A brokers' strength is its network, controlling first order resources, so the broker himself does not need to approach other brokers' (networks). At some point in his career, the broker is able to convert its second order resources, through its network of first order resources, into value in the form of a job at a political administrative office for example. The ability of brokers to shift positions in their career, thus also means enhancing its power status. Bierschenk et al. (2002) refer to brokerage in itself as a form of social promotion or moving upwards internally or externally, although the broker's informal character could reverse these newly obtained positions quite easily, for example due to (lack of) trust issues.



Institutions for Equity & Resilience

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



The Successful Broker

In becoming a (development) broker the following conditions are a prerequisite: 1) contacts with development projects, and 2) acquired experience obtained through education, job(s), in politics or in activism (Bierschenk et al., 2002). These conditions help in shaping the (development) broker in its position and enable the broker in bridging possible gaps. Although placed in the context of development brokerage, the following ‘basic’ competences are relevant to take into account for further conceptualization: 1) rhetoric (speak the language), 2) organizational, 3) scenographic (show window), and 4) relational. Two additional competences were added for the more experienced ‘big time’ broker, namely: 5) setting up your own project, and 6) gaining direct access (to donors) through short-cuts. (Bierschenk et al., 2002).

Based upon an extended literature review of the concept of ‘Brokerage’, I have identified and categorized different types of brokerage over time in various research disciplines²⁶, hereby also revealing the thin line between intermediaries and elites. At least the land grabbing literature does not seem to be very conclusive. The absence of middlemen in the literature and policymaking on land grabbing is for example discussed by Sud (2014), while Keene, Walsh-Dilley, Wolford, and Geisler (2015, p. 131) refers to the rise of large-scale land acquisition literature, with ‘[...] *little attention on elite actors and their motivations*’. One of the main rationales behind this could lie in the complexity of land deals itself, involving a wide range of state and non-state actors (public/private) at different governance levels (horizontal/vertical), which makes it difficult to get a grasp on the actual actors involved in their complex networks (Evers et al., 2013). These intermediaries are frequently being identified as a new type of ‘elite entrepreneurs’, because of their excellent entrepreneurial skills. Middle men could for example be involved in land transactions between two villages, but their ultimate goal is climbing up the value chain (Sud, 2014).

In discussing the direct and indirect motivations of elites in the Global North and South in becoming involved in land deals, Geisler (2015) argues that specifically the ‘rent-seeking’ behavior distinguishes elites from non-elites, interconnected through the pillars: *power*, *prestige*, and *option value*, where land is treated as a financial asset.

Land brokers in general are defined in several research disciplines, with a variety of terminologies being used. The financial land broker derived from the discipline (farm)land brokers, also referred to as financial intermediary (Ducastel & Anseeuw, 2017), mainly derived from the political economy literature where land is seen as a financial asset. Ducastel and Anseeuw (2017) discuss this for the South African farming sector. In post-Suharto Indonesia, governmental decentralization, and

²⁶ So far I have identified the following categories of brokerage: general (mostly theoretical), Cultural, Development, Political, Economy/Trade, Financial/Agriculture, and Security/Military. This framework is hence not conclusive but serves as a basis for further research. For the sake of this specific article Land brokerage will be highlighted. The established theoretical ‘brokerage’ framework will be presented in another theoretical article.



Institutions for Equity & Resilience

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



consequently processes of land reform (*reformasi*) has led to the emergence of local non-governmental, and regional (non)governmental power brokers with a background in governments or *adat* (customary land rights), with the common denominator claiming access to land, or controlling access to land (Bakker, 2009). Sud (2014, pp. 601-603) identifies a broad category of land intermediaries in India operating on local, national and regional levels: land aggregator, land broker, local broker (dalal), Muscleman and enforcer, Consultant, Party representative, Government representative, and Tout. In an ethnographic study of 2 Romanian Transylvanian villages Verdery (2002) describes how local mayors obstructed the land restitution process. Perrine, Mathilde, Rivo, and Raphael (2011, p. 3) discuss the pivotal role mayors play in facilitating private investments, '[...] *as they do or have done in the past with international aid projects*'. Hereby directly referring to one of the key criteria of 'The Successful Broker'; namely the ability to easily shift positions or hold multiple positions over time or at the same time.

Violent peasant entrepreneurship is specifically discussed in a study of the Mafioso in a Sicilian peasant village (Blok, 1974), hereby showing resemblance with the Mexican agrarian 'Cacique' (Friedrich, 1968). Blok (1974) draws similarities with the study of Friedrich (1968), based upon two dimensions that differentiate Mafiosi from 'common' intermediaries: 1) misuse communication in the gap between peasant and society, and 2) the use of threat and physical violence to secure their position (Blok, 1974). The Sicilian Mafiosi and the Mexican Cacique are both positioned between unstable political cultures, proven to be an ideal setting for brokerage and exploitation of resources (Blok, 1974).

Based upon the above exposition and earlier conducted literature review (see footnote 26), I introduce the concept of 'Intermediary Elite Land Broker'. A successful intermediary elite broker meets the following criteria, next to central earlier introduced concepts of '*power*', '*centrality*', and '*time*'.



Institutions for Equity & Resilience

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



The Successful Land Broker – Key Criteria

A ‘successful elite entrepreneur’ thus meets the following criteria (‘skills’), next to central concepts of ‘power’, ‘centrality’, and ‘time’ (Figure 1, (Boissevain (1974)):

- 1) Mobility/transformative power: their ability to easily shift positions (or hold dual positions), operate on the local-national interface, and quickly adapt to new circumstances driven by political, economic, and/or societal change,
- 2) Networking skills,
- 3) Communication: speaking multiple languages, speaking the same language (rhetoric),
- 4) Information: their knowledge gained through experience and/or education,
- 5) Building up a (reciprocal) trust relationship, over time,
- 6) Informality: their role is informal which makes them less visible in their often shady and corrupt transactions,
- 7) Excellent manipulators, and
- 8) Rent-seeking behaviour.

Intermediary Elite Brokers

‘Central to the non-transparent, questionable transactions is the role of a range of “brokers”, middlemen who facilitate transactions for large-scale land acquisition. They are the new land-grabbing entrepreneurs, an emerging elite who, in turn, transact with other land-rush elites.’ (van der Ploeg et al., 2015, p. 152).

The transition of former communist countries toward a capitalist Western-style liberal market economy (Cooley, 2003; Deacon, 2000; Eyal, Szelenyi, & Townsley, 1998) did not always work out positively, specifically in recent years. Post-communist regimes still struggle with the legacy of communism, embedded in their institutions and social structures, reflected the last decade in an overall democratic decline (FH, 2017, 2018; Lührmann et al., 2018), wherein democratic nationalism is slowly replaced by more authoritarian regimes, which makes them less resilient and more vulnerable for corrupt practices (Beyme, 1993; FH, 2011; Lührmann et al., 2018; Uslaner, 2008).

Hereby also introducing a relatively new category of land broker intermediaries or land grab entrepreneurs entering the post-communist property market, directly profiting from post-communist confusion, leading to negative changes in land property relations and land use, as underlying quote depicts:

‘[a]fter communism fell, we had this state parties...[...]. We had this transition period of 2-3 years where nobody knew what to do. Those years we had a fresh democracy/fresh capitalism but nothing to regulate it, and nobody to supervise it [...]. So basically in 1992-1994 already big multinational



Institutions for Equity & Resilience

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



companies started to come to Romania to buy land or to access land, using the fact that the local governments did not had any vision for the state land that it still had in his hands.’²⁷

This can be directly linked to one of the main characteristics of ‘brokerage’, namely ‘the ability to easily shift positions and quickly adapt to new circumstances, driven by political, economic, and/or societal change’ (see *The Successful Broker*).

Both new brokers and established former communist party technocrats, the so-called ‘nomenklatura’ (Beyme, 1993; Eyal et al., 1998) or the ‘New Class’ (R. Hall et al., 2015), retained their economic position by directly profiting from the post-communist confusion and fuzziness in rural property relations.

A cultural bourgeoisie²⁸ or second post-communist *Bildungsbürgertum*, an upper class of 1) intellectuals, and 2) technocratic-managerial elites as ‘agents of change’, led the great transformation process from socialism to capitalism (Eyal et al., 1998). From an historical as well as theoretical perspective it is interestingly to look as these different groups of old and new elites in order to be able to explain how intermediary elite brokers developed over time.

In an attempt to provide more detailed insight in post-communist class dynamics, Eyal et al. (1998) identify three elite groups: 1) Nomenklatura: former communist party technocrats/old (economic) elites, 2) Post-communist political & cultural elites, and 3) ‘New’ economic elites. Many old economic elites retained their power position (Beyme, 1993). These elite groups however seem more related to the traditional ‘higher’ ranking ruling elite classes in politics and in top management positions (Beyme, 1993; Eyal et al., 1998), which can conceptually directly be related to the concept of ‘power elites’ (Mills, 1956), and the traditional Marxist ‘capitalist ruling upper classes’.

Studies on ‘political ‘power’ elites’²⁹ tend to focus more on the political institutional elite (e.g. Dahl, 1961; Domhoff, 1998; Mills, 1956), with hence a strong focus on Marxism and social class theory³⁰. Earlier classical elite theorists and sociologists Mosca and Pareto conceptualized the political elite as a group of governing and non-governing superior political ruling class (Parsons, Shils, Naegele, & Pitts, 1961). Pareto’s most famous contribution to the literature is the ‘circulation of elites’ theory, in where elites constantly move back and forth, which is relevant in understanding different forms of elite power structures (Abbink & Salverda, 2013; Parsons et al., 1961). Marx explained how the upper ruling class

²⁷ Interview with respondent 3¹, conducted d.d. 15-05-’17, through Skype.

²⁸ In developing a typology of bourgeois classes, drawing upon works from Bourdieu and Weber, cultural bourgeoisie can be defined as ‘a historical coalition of groups and class fractions, whose power and privilege are based on the possession of cultural capital and whose project is to foster the transition from rank order to a system of class stratification’ Eyal et al. (1998, p. 47).

²⁹ As earlier mentioned, the concept of ‘elites’ is not embedded in a solid theoretical framework. The concept of ‘power elites’, as an isolated concept, however is widely discussed and debated in academic literature. The concept of ‘power elites’ is defined by Mills (1956, p. 18) as ‘[...] those political, economic, and military circles, which as an intricate set of overlapping small but dominant groups share decisions having at least national consequences. Insofar as national events are decided, the power elite are those who decide them’. There are three different theoretical models to explain the concept of ‘power elites’: 1) Mills (1956) Pyramid of Power, 2) Domhoff (1998) ‘Governing Class’ or ‘Class-Domination Theory of Power’, and 3) Parenti (1978); (Parenti, 2010) ‘Bias of the System’ Theory. All these three theoretical models however have a strong focus on US power elites structures (Eitzen & Zinn, 2003, pp. 409-418).

³⁰ For a further theoretical elaboration of the concept of ‘the political ‘power’ elite’ I would like to refer to my paper ‘The Political ‘Power’ Elite in Large-Scale Land Grabbing Discourse (Verhoog, 2015a).



Institutions for Equity & Resilience

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



enriched itself through a process of ‘primitive accumulation of capital’, translated as an historical (primitive) process of separating the producer from the means of production (Marx, 1961 (1887)). Marx political economic approach has later been translated by (Harvey, 2003) into ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (ABD). If land can be seen as the basic means of production, it makes sense that both primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession are widely being applied in the land grabbing literature in order to explain and identify the commodification of land (often for profit maximization) through the following processes: ‘dispossessionary responses to capitalist crises, the use of extra-economic means of capital accumulation, and the creation, expansion and reproduction of capitalist social relations.’ (D. Hall, 2013, p. 1599).

In defining and understanding elites for this study it is not sufficient to solely focus on class and economic position (capital). Abbink and Salverda (2013) argue that a political economy approach to elites with a focus on capital, class and property is required, but does not take into account the social, cultural and socio-cognitive aspects. In an attempt to understand elites from ‘within’ is to shift the attention away from the ‘top down’ position on the hierarchical ladder, more toward a ‘bottom up’ anthropological approach, with a focus on ‘*elite cultures*’ and ‘*social structures*’ (e.g. Abbink & Salverda, 2013; Shore & Nugent, 2002), through for example the three capitals (economic, social, and cultural) of Bourdieu (1986). Sociologists Bourdieu and Coleman focus more on the ‘anthropology of elites’ to explain *social change* in the context of social capital and social networks (Bourdieu, 1984; Coleman, 1988). Bourdieu uses the concept to explain individual actions within their social structure (*habitus*), and its dialectic relationship with the wider social world (*the field*). Bourdieu however has a strong focus on the middle and upper class elites, and lacking a more holistic view of the ‘world’ in where social actors interact. Coleman offers a broader view on social capital in where social capital is not ‘owned’, but rather seen as a ‘resource’ available to the people. Coleman furthermore sees social capital as ‘a value for all kinds of communities, including the powerless and marginalised’ (Gauntlett, 2011, p. 3). Bourdieu and Coleman both however fail to explain how social capital can be used to increase equality (Häuberer, 2010). They furthermore tend to focus on certain ‘institutionalized groups’ (Häuberer, 2010), while social relationships can be much broader conceptualized with the inclusion of non-institutionalized groups and networks. Elite theory, with its origins in the political and social sciences, overall lacks a more holistic approach, which is needed to study this newly emerging group of intermediary elites. Elite theory in the political and social sciences tends to adhere a macro meta-theoretical approach with hence a focus on top elites in powerful political institutions (Abbink & Salverda, 2013; Higley & Pakulski, 2012). Schijf (2013) blames ‘methodological individualism’ in the political and social sciences by its predominant focus on elites as individuals, hereby disregarding their relational context.



Institutions for Equity & Resilience

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



New theoretical and methodological tools are urgently needed to be able to understand how this newly emerging fluid group of intermediaries operate and exercise their power (Abbink & Salverda, 2013; Savage & Williams, 2008). New theoretical insights on power relations can emerge by applying a more holistic approach toward studying and analyzing this specific group of elites by focussing on how social reality is constructed by the actors themselves within their historical, cultural and social context (Salverda, 2010; Schijf, 2013). An anthropological focus can specifically deliver empirically rich contributions to elite theory by its focus on social and cultural relations, for example through a social analysis of money, finance and power (Savage & Williams, 2008). Anthropological studies on elites are relatively scarce, which can be ascribed to the strong focus on social stratification, and power struggles in political-economic systems in the West (Abbink & Salverda, 2013).

Since intermediary elite brokers manoeuvre within and between their networks at the several levels, hereby mutually influencing each other. Hereby creating new ‘patronage’ networks, which makes them even more powerful (Schijf, 2013). Studying elites within their networks is therefore a prerequisite. The interaction of elites between their spatial networks is still much ignored in scholarly research (Schijf, 2013). Schijf (2013) offers a theoretical framework in which elites can be studied in their spatial context on local, national, region and global levels from an anthropological perspective. This approach will be applied for my study in structuring how fluid elites interact and operate between these often hybrid governance levels (Figure 2).

Elites				
	Local	Regional	National	Global
Local	Strict Local Elites	Interaction	Interaction	Interaction
Regional		Strict Regional Elites	Interaction	Interaction
National			Strict National Elites	Interaction
Global				Strict Global Elites

Figure 2 Elite Networks at four Governance Levels (Adopted from Schijf (2013, p. 42))

In the political economy literature, agriculture is seen as an emerging liquid financial asset, the financial market intermediary is gaining solid ground (Ducastel & Anseeuw, 2017). In the South



Institutions for Equity & Resilience

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



African farming sector these intermediary brokers mediate between global actors and the agricultural sector (Ducastel & Anseeuw, 2017). In post-Suharto Indonesia, governmental decentralization, and consequently processes of land reform (*reformasi*) has led to the emergence of local and regional non-governmental power brokers with a background in governments or *adat* (customary land rights), with the common denominator claiming access to land, or controlling access to land (Bakker, 2009). In an ethnographic study on Romanian land restitution processes, after the enactment of land law no. 18 in 1991, Verdery (2002) describes how an eroding central power resulted in an increase of power at the lower-level by local mayors. This subsequently led to delays in the restitution processes. Perrine et al. (2011, p. 3) discuss the pivotal role mayors play in facilitating private investments as they have previously done in international aid projects, hereby revealing one of the main characteristics of brokerage, namely the ability to easily shift positions or hold multiple positions over time or at the same time. This can be directly related to the post-communist setting and the nomenklatura elites, still holding their position and exercising power over time. Comparisons can be drawn with the role of the village chief in a post-colonial chief operating on the interface between the local community and the colonial government (Cotula, 2013; Gluckman, Mitchell, & Barnes, 1949).

While Keene et al. (2015) distinguish a broad variety of deeply connected elites involved in land investments from the state to the local level, Sud (2014) identifies a broad category of land intermediaries in India operating on local, national and regional levels. It seems that both concepts are being used interchangeably hereby revealing the thin line between intermediary and elite brokers. At least the land grabbing literature does not seem to be very conclusive. Both Keene et al. (2015); Sud (2014) highlight the underrepresentation of elites and middlemen in the literature and policymaking on land grabbing and LSLA. One of the main rationales could lie in the complexity of land deals itself, involving a wide range of state and non-state actors (public/private) at different governance levels (horizontal/vertical), which makes it difficult to get a grasp on the actual actors involved in their complex (informal) networks (Evers et al., 2013). I therefore conceptualize this relatively new group of mediators as 'Intermediary Elite Brokers', defined as '*a group of intermediaries whose power rests on being able to forge connections and bridge gaps.*' (Savage & Williams, 2008, p. 4), hereby transcending local, regional, national, and/or transnational borders.

To summarize: there is a research gap in studying intermediary elite brokers in land grabbing practices, in general and more specifically in a post-communist setting, embedded in their historical, cultural and social context. Research furthermore lacks an understanding of intermediary elite brokers and their interaction between their spatial networks. A few scholars study elite theory in a post-communist non-Western setting (Abbink & Salverda, 2013). Reframing of elite theory is needed in



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ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



order to be able to understand how these intermediaries maneuver and exercise their powers in present day post-socialist transformative democracies.

In order to better understand how brokerage patterns developed through history, and how brokers operate and interact in post-socialist transformative democracies, I have established underlying conceptual framework based on a theoretical analysis of brokerage over time. I have identified different brokerage categories, resulting in an overview of main characteristics of a ‘successful intermediary elite broker’ which will help to gain more insight in how elites operate and maneuver in and between their spatial networks. This categorization helps me in establishing an elite interaction model for Romanian hybrid governance structures, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

IV Data Analysis

Based on a literature review, and empirical data collected during several fieldwork trips, I developed a first identification and classification of interacting layers of stakeholders on four hybrid governance layers. I have identified the following categories of stakeholders, however not conclusive.

Banks, hedge funds and other international investors

In Romania there are several ways to buy land. For ‘foreigners’ the most common eligible way is via so-called Societate cu Răspundere Limitată (SRL’s), private national companies. Examples are:

1. The Dutch company Frisian Investors³¹ operates through the Romanian company Pro Frizon SRL. (purchasing 4,000 ha of land). Local intermediaries are involved, including the mayor.
2. The Dutch Rabobank operating through the hedgefund Rabo Farm, and three national companies in acquiring 21,000 hectares of land, spread over 3 regions and 51 villages (Dale-Harris, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). In at least 11 cases purchased land is under investigation by the Romanian state prosecutors and anti-corruption authorities for fraudulent practices (Dale-Harris, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Underlying quote reveals the involvement of subsidiaries and local corrupt mediators, including the mayor:

‘[...] so basically in the Rabo Farm case, the Rabobank owns the hedgefund Rabo Farm, the company RaboFarm is where the pension funds are investing their money [...]. Then Rabo Farm created Kamparo holding, Kamparo holding is a Dutch company, which is owned by Rabo Farm. And then Rabo Farm owns three companies in Romania: Kamparo, and These are hiring local companies, and then the mayor, they have this problem, one of the guys who is the head of Kamparo

³¹ <http://www.frisianinvestors.nl/english.html>. Accessed 15 February 2020.



Institutions for Equity & Resilience

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



*Romania went far-off. Went like, he hired local thugs [...]. The mayors were like the most corrupt figures.*³².

Rabo Farm claimed that based on a 'Due Diligence' (DD) analysis³³ on the sellers, no fraudulent practices were found (Dale-Harris & Semeniuc, 2015). After the negative publicity Rabobank was however keen to quickly sell the land to another company³⁴. Rabo Farm does no longer exist. In a question about Rabobank's land investments in Eastern Europe related to issues of global food security, the Rabobank Food and Agri director responded that *'the Rabo is not active in Central and Eastern Europe'*³⁵.

Power of local-level authorities: Mayors (city hall/city council), Priests and others

Collected data (theoretical as well as empirical) seems to support the claim the pivotal role the mayor and priest plays in land transactions in Romania, as already elaborated upon in my literature review in more detail, and as became clear from the previous section. Mayors play a prominent role as mediators in Eastern European land transactions: *'It's very subtle information that you can get only if you are in the middle of everything like the mayors you know'*³⁶.

The mayor (city hall), and adjacent stakeholders seem to directly benefit from the fuzziness in land administration by obstructing (inherited) land restitution processes, with the ultimate aim of making the land available again for resale:

'We as a family, my grandmother and I, we are trying to recover our land, but it is impossible. The city hall doesn't let us; they raise one obstacle after another for twenty years. They are refusing on different grounds to give it back. [...] 'I don't have a contract, everybody knows it belongs to us' [...] 'I already started several lawsuits, invested money in it' [...] 'The corruption is everywhere; they arrange things in such a way to make it impossible further; they make deadlines; they make a request and put it on the door of the mărie (i.e. city hall). I do not know so I cannot submit the papers. They don't send notifications, e-mails, nothing'. 'They legally take you out of the game, dispossess you'

*'It's a lobby, a strategy in Romania; it's the city hall, the county council, the politicians, the Party who is told to support this attitude, it's like this, the law allows it'. 'If you want to buy large surfaces of land in Romania it's much easier to just go to the city hall because you don't have to negotiate with tens of thousands of people'*³⁷.

³² Interview conducted with respondent 3, d.d. 15-05-'17, through Skype.

³³ Rabo Farm claimed to perform a 'Due Diligence' analysis in the investment phase *'on sellers, leaseholders, farms, operators and many other factors that are relevant for the transaction'* before farmland is acquired, based on the 5 Rabo Farm 'Farmland Principles' for responsible investments: Promoting environmental sustainability, Respecting labour and human rights, Respecting existing land and resource rights, Upholding high business & ethical standards, and Reporting on the activities and progress towards implementing and promoting the Principles. (RaboFarm, 2014, p. 4). For a critical comparative analysis on the effectiveness of voluntary guidelines/principles on global land governance, see also (Verhoog, 2015b).

³⁴ Interview conducted with respondent 3^{II}, d.d. 09-05-'18 in Bucharest, Romania.

³⁵ Correspondence with respondent 11.

³⁶ Interview conducted with respondent 2.

³⁷ Information gathered from respondents 4 & 6.



Institutions for Equity & Resilience

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



Collected empirical data furthermore support the pivotal role of the church and its priests in facilitating land. Just as mayors, priests (churches) own and control land and land administration; in other words they own the official documents, land deeds and contracts:

*'The church owns a lot of land'. 'A lot of local churches benefited from the land restitution law (no. 18/1991) in where land that was formerly taken by the communists was restituted; they benefit legal, but actually the land wasn't theirs before. A lot of old people died, and so on..' [...] 'For example forests, they have to give it back to the (orthodox) church, but afterwards some real owners come along and say, "wait that was actually my great great great grandfathers' land" [...] 'They get in court but the church wins'.*³⁸

The farmer/business representative I met in Chirnogi was given 10 ha of land from the church to grow soy on. He is not allowed to benefit from the yield. His farm is surrounded by large plots of agricultural land, owned by one of the biggest investors in Romania: the Maria Group Holding (see *Oligarchs*). The church made an arrangement with Maria Group SRL, in where the city hall mayor most likely plays a crucial role. This deal is probably carefully covered up without leaving a paper trail³⁹.

Land Surveyor/land broker

Land Surveyors measure land, and set the boundaries. They play a role in the registration of land in the several cadastres (local, regional, national?). I came in contact with one land surveyor who is also land broker. He was asked by a large Romanian farmer to sell two of his cattle farms (including approx. 1,600 ha of land in lease/ownership construction). He provided me documents and a map with dozens of (often small) fragmented pieces of land, some isolated and some of them interconnected with each other. He furthermore told me that he also 'deals with the Chinese, but only if I like them'⁴⁰.

Lawyer/Notary, 'some groups of people'

One respondent indicated the problems he encountered when he was reclaiming his property, after the restitution law in 1991. He mentions the important role of 'some corrupt groups' and the lawyer/notary:

'There were problems with the restitution' [...] 'I have a building/apartment house in the north of the country and I bought in 1990 and in 2008 some groups, very specialized who have found that they have some rights on this house' [...] 'we have a lot of examples' 'Its very simple to make some arrangement with the lawyer/notary, and I have had everything very clear, at the official cadastre

³⁸ Information gathered from respondent 6.

³⁹ Information gathered from respondent 7.

⁴⁰ Information gathered from respondents 8 & 9.



Institutions for Equity & Resilience

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



registration and I made a reclamation to the mayor...they answer me ok it is mine'. 'If somebody has no sufficient knowledge about these issues its very simple to lose the rights on the property'.⁴¹

The above example shows that without the proper knowledge and entitlements it was and is very easy to lose the right of property.

Real Estate Agencies and Associate brokers

It is fairly easy in Romania to buy or sell property via real estate agencies. An example is Artmark Historical Estate (AHE) and their associates (four brokers). Via their bi-annual catalogue it is possible to buy a large portion of land in the UNESCO protected Danube Delta nature reserve (Tulcea county)⁴².

Oligarchs versus State Elites

A few examples of Arab investors in Romanian farmland, through national, often (former) state owned, companies (see the previous section on *Banks*). Specifically in the poorer South-Eastern counties, collective land remained in state farm construction (owned by the state). These collective lands are being transformed into very large industrial farms, owned by (often corrupt) international oligarchs, supported by state elites. No surprise to mention that these large industrial farms (and their means of production) are not benefitting the local economy. The yield is meant for export to resource poorer countries in the Arab world. Further research is needed to determine the socio-environmental impact of large industrial farms in Romania.

Oligarchs

- 1) The Al Dahra Group, owned by Abu Dhabi based sheikh Hamdan Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, recently bought the former state farm Agricos S.A., with 56,000 hectares being the largest grain producers in Romania, situated in Great Brăila Island; a nature reserve. The Al Dahra group received ten million in EU subsidies (€175/ha)⁴³.
- 2) Maria Group SRL, owned by Lebanese sheikh Jihad El Khalil, is one of the largest firms in Romania; connect to dozens of smaller companies through family liaisons⁴⁴. The sheikh owns one of the largest industrial farms in Romania of 65,000 hectares, in the poorer regions; South-Eastern Călărași and Constanța (EP, 2015). I personally visited this enormous farm in the region Constanța (Maria Group SRL). Jihad El Khalil has been convicted for fraudulent practises with EU-

⁴¹ Information gathered from respondent 10.

⁴² See the spring 2019 catalogue (pp. 76-83). <https://www.artmarkhistoricalestate.ro/catalog>. Accessed 25 February 2020.

⁴³ <https://www.oilseedandgrain.com/single-post/2018/04/03/Al-Dahra-Group-Close-to-200-Million-Euro-Deal-for-Agricos-Romania's-Largest-Grain-Producer>. Accessed 15 February 2020.

⁴⁴ For an overview of Jihad El Khalil's network and affiliated companies, see <https://www.riseproject.ro/persoana/jihad-el-khalil/>. Accessed 15 February 2020.



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ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



funding⁴⁵.

State Elites

The ownership of large portions of land by so-called state elites is quite common in Romania. Examples of state elites involved in large-scale land practises, are; Paul Florin Stănescu, the nephew of deputy Prime Minister Paul Florin Stănescu, sued by the DNA (National Corruption Agency) for tax fraud⁴⁶ is, together with the earlier mentioned Abu-Dhabi based Al Dahra Group, one of the most powerful landowners in Romania⁴⁷. Valentin Dragnea, Liviu's Dragnea's son, is listed in the top 15 of most powerful landowners in Romania with his company Nutrelo Group S.A.⁴⁸. Further research needs to determine the nomenklatura (communist party) ties.

V A first conceptualization of elite interaction and structures in post-socialist Romania

In an attempt to structure the identified categories of stakeholders (Ch. IV) and the interaction within and amongst their (reciprocal) networks, I have applied the theoretical elite interaction framework from Schijf (2013), see also Figure 2. The forthcoming 'Elite Interaction Model' represents a first identification of interacting and interconnected networks of stakeholders on four hybrid governance levels in Romania; an upper global layer of European actors, international investors/oligarchs, a national layer of governmental (state) elites, oligarchs and private investors, a relatively new conceptualized group of in-between (regional) mediators, conceptualized as 'Intermediary Elite Brokers', and a lower level group of various local actors. Hereby transcending local, regional, national, and/or transnational borders.

⁴⁵ <http://observator.ro/in-exclusivitate-urmarit-penal-milionarul-arab-din-constant-a-isi-vede-nestingherit-de-afaceri-289373.html>. Accessed 15 February 2020.

⁴⁶ <https://stirileprotv.ro/justitie/florin-diaconescu-nepotul-vicepremierului-paul-stanescu-trimis-in-judecata-de-dna.html>. Accessed 15 February 2020.

⁴⁷ https://www.economica.net/top-latifundiari-pe-terenul-statului-2019_166685.html. Accessed 24 June 2019.

⁴⁸ https://www.economica.net/fiul-lui-liviu-dragnea-este-in-top-15-proprietari-de-terenuri-din-romania_169355.html. Accessed 15 February 2020.



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ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



	Local	Regional (county level)	National	Global
Local	Mayor/city hall/ (primăr/primăria) Priest/church Local cadastre agencies Land Surveyor Lawyer/Notary Large Industrial farmers Subsistence farmer	Large Industrial farmers Regional Cadastre Agencies County Council The Party Lawyer/Notary	Cadastre (ANCPI) State Domain Agency, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (ADS) State owned companies Private Company: societate cu răspundere limitată (SRL), set up by international investor Trading Company; Societate Comercială (S.C.) State owned companies Nomenclatura national state elites 'The Party' (in general) Real Estate Agencies & Asociați	National state elites (with global influences/impact) Large Industrial farmers International investors/oligarchs Banks/Hedgedfunds via private companies/local intermediaries
Regional (county level)	Large Industrial farmers Mayor/city hall Priest/church	Regional Cadastre Agencies County Council The Party	National state elites (with global influences/impact) The Party State owned companies Private companies Regional Cadastre Agencies Real Estate Agencies & Asociați	Private Company: societate cu răspundere limitată (SRL), set up by international investor Trading Company; Societate Comercială (S.C.) State owned companies
National	Large Industrial farmers Mayor/city hall Priest/church	Large Industrial farmers	National state elites (with global influences/impact) State owned companies Private companies Trading companies Real Estate Agencies & Asociați	Private Company: societate cu răspundere limitată (SRL), set up by international investor Trading Company; Societate Comercială (S.C.)
Global	Large Industrial farmers Mayor/city hall Priest/church	Large Industrial farmers	National state elites (with global influences/impact) interacting with global investors Real Estate Agencies & Asociați	Global elites interacting with global elites: National state elites interacting with foreign investors

Figure 3 Elite Interaction Model for Romanian Hybrid Governance Structures (adopted from Schijf (2013))

VI Conclusion

Romanian (agricultural) land is extremely fragile and vulnerable to (inter)national land grabbing practices. The main aim of the article is to provide more insight in the role and involvement of a great variety of stakeholders involved in land (grabbing) practices in Romania. This article made a first attempt in offering more insight in the role and impact of different type of actors involved on four identified hybrid governance levels. Therefore I have developed underlying 'Elite Interaction Model for Romanian Hybrid Governance Structures'. This framework offers a first insight in Romanian complex governance structures, framed in the large-scale land acquisition discourse. In order to provide more detailed insight in the networks of elites interacting, and the underlying processes of interaction within and among these identified stakeholder groups more research is needed.

Theoretically in research the networks of elites interacting on several governance layers is still much neglected. This research thus contributes in filling this research gap in the literature, with a specific focus on Romanian elites on four hybrid interconnected governance levels.



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WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



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ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 16-20, 2020



Appendix I: Overview Respondents Romanian Fieldwork trips 2017-2019

Table 1 Overview respondents Romanian fieldwork trips 2017-2019

Respondent(s)	Position	Interview typology	Duration	Date
1	Journalist	Skype, semi-structured	45 minutes	02-05-'17
2	Journalist	Bucharest, semi-structured	90 minutes	08-05-'17
3 ^I	Member Peasant Organization/NGO	Skype, semi-structured	90 minutes	15-05-'17
3 ^{II}	Member Peasant Organization/NGO	Cluj, Semi-structured	80 minutes	09-05-'18
4	University students and academics	Cluj, Roundtable on Land Grabbing in the Post-Socialist Era	90 minutes	08-05-'18
5	University students	Cluj, Student meeting Political Science	90 minutes	10-05-'18
6	University students and academics	Cluj, PhD-meeting; debate on land grabbing in Romania and brokerage	90 minutes	18-06-'19
7	Farmer and Business Representative for one of the largest farmers in Romania	Site visit Chirnogi, Călărași county (South-East Romania), informal conversation	120 minutes	08-06-'19
8	Director Environmental Organization	Brașov, semi-structured	60 minutes	12-06-'19
9	Land Broker / Land Surveyor	Brașov, informal conversation	30 minutes	11-06-'19
10	University Dean	Cluj, Semi-structured	20 minutes	18-06-'19
11	Director Food & Agri Netherlands, Rabobank Group	LinkedIn conversation	-	25-06-'18 & 26-07-'18